



Yucatán Peninsula

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Why Go?

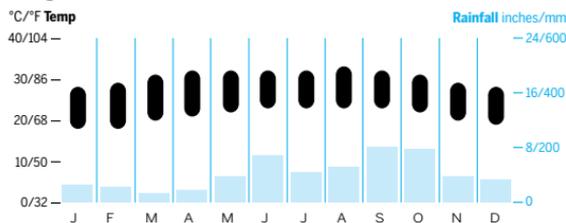
With intriguing colonial cities (both heavily toured and virtually unheard of), world-famous Maya ruins, tranquil fishing villages, Caribbean beaches, and more dive sites than you could ever cram into a single vacation, the Yucatán is one sweet destination.

Despite patches of overzealous development, the natural beauty of the Yucatán abides. Limestone sinkholes, ideal for swimming and diving, abound on the peninsula, while fascinating outdoor activities await in wildlife-rich nature reserves.

Around here, the past is the present and the present is the past. You'll witness it in the towering temples of the Maya, Toltecs and Itzáes, in the cobblestone streets of colonial centers, and in the culture of the Maya themselves, quietly maintaining their traditions as the centuries tick by.

When to Go

Playa del Carmen



Jan & Feb Mérida fest in January and Carnaval in February take place with relatively cool climes.

May & Jun The summer's hot and June is a good time to swim with whale sharks.

Sep–Nov Low-season discounts galore; pleasant November weather for the Day of the Dead.

History

The Maya – accomplished astronomers and mathematicians, and architects of some of the grandest monuments ever known – created their first settlements in what is now Guatemala as early as 2400 BC. Over the centuries, Maya civilization expanded steadily northward, and by AD 550 great Maya city-states were established in southern Yucatán. In the 10th century, the great cities of southern Yucatán slowly dissolved, as attention shifted northward to new power centers such as Chichén Itzá.

The last of the great Maya capitals, Mayapán, started to collapse around 1440, when the Xiu Maya and the Cocom Maya began a violent and protracted struggle for power. In 1540, Spanish conquistador Francisco de Montejo the Younger (son of legendary conquistador Francisco de Montejo the Elder) utilized the tensions between the still-feuding Maya sects to conquer the area. The Spaniards allied themselves with the Xiu against the Cocom, finally defeating the Cocom and gaining the Xiu as reluctant converts to Christianity.

Francisco de Montejo the Younger, along with his father and cousin (named...you guessed it, Francisco de Montejo), founded Mérida in 1542 and within four years brought most of the Yucatán Peninsula under Spanish rule. The Spaniards divided the Maya lands into large estates where the indigenous people were put to work as indentured servants.

When Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821, the new Mexican government used the Yucatecan territory to create huge plantations for the cultivation of tobacco, sugarcane and *henequén* (agave rope fiber). The Maya, though legally free, were enslaved in debt peonage to the rich landowners.

In 1847 the Maya rose up in a massive revolt against the Spanish. This was the beginning of the War of the Castes. Finally, in 1901, after more than 50 years of sporadic, but often intense, violence, a tentative peace was reached. However, it would be another 30 years before the territory of Quintana Roo came under official government control. To this day some Maya do not recognize that sovereignty.

The mass development of Cancún in the early 1970s led to hundreds of kilometers of beachfront property along the Caribbean coast being sold off to commercial interests, displacing many small fishing communities. While many indigenous people still eke out a living by subsistence agriculture or fishing,

large numbers now work in the construction and service industries. Some individuals and communities, often with outside encouragement, are having a go at ecotourism, opening their lands to tourists or working as guides.

QUINTANA ROO

You'd think that solitude would be in short supply in Quintana Roo (pronounced 'kin-tah-nah roh'), one of Mexico's most visited states. But even in gringo-friendly Cancún, you can still find quiet slices of paradise.

There are glaring-white beaches stretching all the way from Cancún to the Belizean border, unassuming Caribbean islands protected by the barrier reef, and impressive Maya sites throughout this long-arching sliver of limestone, salt and sea.

The high season for Quintana Roo is basically December to April. Prices (and crowds) peak from mid-December to mid-January, late February to early March (the US spring break) and a week on either side of Easter.

Cancún

📍 998 / POP 630,000

Cancún is a tale of two cities. There's the glitzy hotel zone with its famous white-sand beaches, unabashed party scene and sophisticated seafood restaurants. Then there's the actual city itself, which gives you a taste of local flavor at, say, a neighborhood taco joint or at the undeveloped beaches of Isla Blanca, just north of downtown.

That's what keeps Cancún interesting. Had your fill of raucous discos in the hotel zone? Escape to a downtown salsa club. Tired of lounging around the pool in Ciudad Cancún? Simply hop on a bus and head for the sapphire waters of the hotel zone.

👁️ Sights & Activities

★ Museo Maya de Cancún

MUSEUM

(Maya Museum; Map p258; www.inah.gob.mx; Blvd Kukulcán Km 16.5; M\$64; ☀️ 9am-6pm Tue-Sun; 🚗 R-1) Holding one of the Yucatán's most important collections of Maya artifacts, this modern museum is a welcome sight in a city known more for its party scene than cultural attractions. On display are some 400 pieces found at key sites in and around the peninsula, ranging from sculptures to ceramics and jewelry. One of the three halls shows temporary Maya-themed exhibits.